A Note on Language and Disabilities in the P.T. Barnum Digital Collection

The P.T. Barnum Digital Collection includes a number of examples of 19th century America’s perspective on individuals with disabilities. Creating complete and accurate catalog records demands attention to both historic perspectives and respect to contemporary communities. As such, the P.T. Barnum Digital Collection has tried to balance these two perspectives.

As such, the P.T. Barnum Digital Collection uses the following standards. To begin, the collection uses people first language, that is giving a person’s name and then their particular diagnosis (if known), as many disability scholars and advocates prefer. In addition, the catalog descriptions use three models of disability. Complex embodiment, which strives to acknowledge how society and medical diagnosis impact an individual’s life, is the collection’s guiding model for creating robust overall description. In the description of items themselves, the P.T. Barnum Digital Collection relies on complex embodiment along with the social model, which focuses on how society limits those with disability from participating fully is given prominence in length written descriptions. Search terms (see below) rely on a combination of the medical model, which focuses on a person’s limits are, what the medical diagnosis is, and how to fix it.

These search terms are not customized from the collection, but are a part of a set vocabulary list that is decided upon a governing authority. In the case of the P.T. Barnum Digital Collection, that authority is the Library of Congress, and the Library of Congress subject headings are used by most institutions to ensure maximum findability when someone completes a search. These headings are slow to change, and thus many of them err towards the medical model when it comes to matters of disability. As a result, our subject headings adhere to the medical model even though we would have preferred not to employ such language. Whenever possible, the heading “people with disabilities--” has been employed to ensure that medical diagnosis is not the only term that can be used to locate an object.

Likewise, on occasion, outdated language is quoted in the description for an object in order to provide accurate transcription. The P.T. Barnum Digital Collection is aware that these are out of date and often hurtful terms, and they are only used in quotations.

Language regarding disabilities continues to change, and even our contemporary descriptions may yet fall victim to using outdated language. This is not a bad thing, it is simply a reflection of an ever-changing understanding of disabilities and how to approach them in the most respectful manner.

Additional information regarding the decision making process with regards to description can be viewed here.